

# HINDU WOMEN

AND

## THEIR HOMES.

BY

MRS. HELEN JACKSON.

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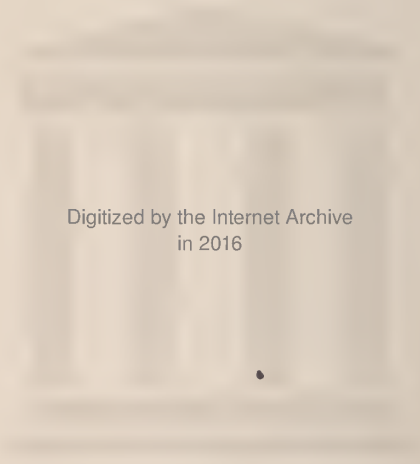
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The most earnest wish of every Hindu's heart, is that he may have a son to perform his funeral obsequies. If, instead of a son, his wife gives birth to a daughter, he is disappointed and angry, and his displeasure is wreaked alike on the wife and the unfortunate babe. Another reason for the dislike he shows his daughter, is in the expense which must be incurred on her behalf. She must be married—there is no escape from it; and that marriage means the expenditure of large sums of money among the well-to-do, and of utterly impoverishing those who are poor, for they must mortgage all they own, and borrow money at a high rate of interest, often leaving debts for their sons or grandsons to pay off.

It is not common for a Hindu to manifest any regard for his daughter. She must keep out of the way. For the first few years of her life she has scanty food and scantier raiment. She has no toys, and almost no idea of play. If she

goes to school she is carried there in a closely covered conveyance borne on the shoulders of men who earn their living in that way. When she is five or six years of age, and in families of rank much earlier than that, she is formally engaged, and this betrothal is as binding as the marriage ceremony itself. Neither of the contracting parties, as a rule, has any voice in the matter. The overtures of marriage come from the bride's father and are made through the barber. This may seem a singular matrimonial agent, but no other would do as well. The father cannot leave his work, and the barber who visits his customers frequently in their own homes, shaving the heads of male members of the families, becomes acquainted with the circumstances of those families. He shaves only those in the same caste, and a word of explanation just here, may not be amiss.

Caste, means the religious position a man holds. A Brahmin's son is, like his father, a Brahmin, and in this position of hereditary priesthood he is considered superior to all others. Should a prince meet a Brahmin, he will get down from his horse or conveyance, and make the most humble salutation before the priest, though the latter may be a beggar. After the

Brahmins come the soldier, the merchant, the farmer and the mechanic, and others still lower. None of these may inter-marry. They cannot eat or smoke together, and each grade despises the one beneath it.

The barber, then, is sent out on his mission. He may perhaps travel many miles, visiting distant cities, before he finds a husband for the little girl. The husband may be a lad of tender years, or a man old enough to be her grandfather. She may be the first and only wife, or the third or fourth. In any case, her opinion is never asked, and she cannot rebel.

If the search be satisfactory, the betrothal ceremonies are performed, and the little girl now makes visits, at stated times, to the home of her husband. All boys bring their wives home to the father's house. If the father is not living, the home is made with the elder brother or uncle, so that in one zenana twelve or fifteen women may have their homes.

This little girl is not at any time, before the actual marriage, seen by the husband. During the day, while the men and boys are away, she mingles freely with the women of the house, but when the men return she draws her little veil closely about her and keeps out of sight. When

she is twelve years old, the marriage takes place. A feast is made in which all the cooking is done by the Brahmins, so that all who are bidden may eat without fear of contamination, which would not be the case if the food were prepared by a regular cook. The feast extends from seven to fourteen days. Relatives and friends are called in, the house is swept and garnished. At night the building is outlined in lighted lamps from cornice to floor. Sometimes English guests are invited; dancing girls and jugglers entertain the company, to whom costly presents are sometimes given. Outside the house many beggars are seated. Though unbidden, they nevertheless claim their portion of food, and sometimes fifty or more of these men and women will haunt a house during the whole period of the festivities, receiving twice a day a liberal portion of food. On the fourteenth day the bridegroom comes. It is not considered proper for him to walk to his wedding, so he goes mounted on an elephant, camel, horse, or carried in a sedan-chair. The horse, however, is the most general means of locomotion. It is usually white, elaborately ornamented with green and gold spots, with a large necklace of beads about its neck, and with mane and tail dyed a most brilliant red.

On a gayly decorated saddle, without stirrups, the bridegroom sits. His feet, stockingless, but thrust into green and gold or scarlet slippers, approach the ground. A white cap heavily embroidered with gold is perched jauntily on one side of a head which positively glistens with a liberal anointing of cocoanut oil. In front of him march native musicians dressed in cast-off English regimentals, playing on broken and abandoned brass instruments—all playing the treble and making the most startling noises that ever saluted mortal ear. Behind him are male friends, followed in turn by servants bearing on their heads trays of fruits, sweetmeats, jewelry and dresses, quite often paid for by the father of the bride. This party does not approach the bride's home till nightfall. The women of the house go out to meet the bridegroom and lead him into the women's apartments, where the bride is seated on a little raised platform. He sits beside her. The priest comes to them with a small portion of cooked rice which they eat sitting together for the first and only time in all their lives. A prayer is recited, the veil or shawl which the bridegroom wears about his shoulders is knotted to that which the bride wears, the ceremony is over, and the little girl

takes leave of her childhood's home, never to come back to it unless she should become a widow. She is taken to her home in a covered conveyance. There has been no attempt at beautifying the home which is to be hers. It is only one little room six feet square and as many high, with clay floor and walls and thatched roof. The only furniture is a rude cot without sheets, pillows or mattress, furnished perhaps with one cotton comfortable. A small wooden box in which her clothing is kept; a rude clay vessel filled with oil, and in it a twisted cotton wick; a few brass dishes; an earthen fire-place in one corner, and a mill, are all that the room contains. The fourth side of the room is entirely open to the courtyard which is common to all the inmates of the zenana. A bamboo screen hangs in the opening, but it is little or no protection against wind or rain, heat or cold. The little child-wife comes in to be a sort of general servant to the other women, and especially to her mother-in-law. She must also take upon her little shoulders all the burden of preparing her husband's food. In order to do this she rises very early in the morning and grinds the wheat from which the bread is made. This is done every day. The mills are two flat round stones,



one above the other, similar to those spoken of in Scripture. Two women grind together till all is done, then each takes her own portion, kneads it, flattens it out between her hands, and bakes it on an iron saucer which is turned upside down over the fire. She also prepares vegetables with spices and mustard oil. When she has baked a sufficient number of cakes she calls her husband, who at this time may be on the house-top smoking his pipe and exchanging greetings with his neighbors in the streets below. This, the only cool place to be found, is reserved for the men. No woman is allowed to mount the stairs that ascend to the roof. The wife calls her husband, but not by his name. That is too good for her to use. He is to her only a despotic master, and as such she addresses him. Should they have sons, he is called by the name of the eldest. He comes down and washes his head, face, mouth, hands and feet, takes his seat on a mat which is kept for him, and eats his food. While the meal is in progress, the wife retires to a corner of the room or yard, turns her face to the wall and sits in absolute silence. It would be the height of rudeness for her to watch her husband while he eats. If he finds himself very warm he calls her and she stands

behind him and fans him till he is ready to go. After he is gone, she gathers up the cold, uninviting fragments and eats them. If nothing be left, she prepares more for herself. When the meal is over, she washes the dishes with water and a little sand from the courtyard. Her work is now practically over until the time to prepare the evening meal. There are thousands to whom only one meal a day is possible.

The day is passed in sleeping, or talking with the women of the house, and in making offerings of rice and flowers to the household gods. If the season be unhealthy, she prays to the goddess of small-pox or of cholera, that her home may be spared. She also prays that she may not become a widow, for that is the sum of all misery to her.

Her position in the house is inferior to that of the horse or cow. She is a soulless chattel, and her husband has all authority over her, beating her if dissatisfied with her—often for little or no cause, and she is taught to rejoice even in his displeasure; to be meek and quiet at all times; when he is sad, to be in the depths of despair; when he is happy, to be in ecstasy; and in everything to be subject to his will. The husband has no idea of rational conversation with his wife.

If he wishes to talk he seeks the society of his masculine friends or relatives. The wife is never treated with any respect or consideration. If she fail to give birth to a son, she may be divorced, and there is no appeal against the decision of her cruel master. She is liable to be put out into the street to take care of herself.

Not long ago such an one came to the magistrate of the town in which she lived, and on her knees besought him to compel her husband to support her. His answer was, "There is no redress ; the law allows your husband to divorce you." And so she was turned away helpless and homeless.

As mothers these women are unhappy. Their daughters are a source of sadness—a reason for brutal and contemptuous treatment on the part of the husband. Their sons are taught to despise them, and when a boy is old enough to use vile and abusive terms to his mother, the father is delighted with his son's precocity and speaks of it to his friends.

When disease comes to these women, it finds them all unprepared. They are cut off from medical help, unless rendered by a lady physician, as no respectable woman would consent to be looked at by a man not of the household;

and if she were willing, her husband would not allow it. She might die in untold sufferings and he would not break through his rules. A sick woman is regarded with suspicion, as having sinned and incurred the displeasure of the gods. Naturally the women of the house are timid about approaching her, and so it happens that the poor sufferer is uncared for. If burning with thirst, she must herself procure the refreshing water; if faint from hunger, she must prepare her own food. Many women die for want of the commonest attention. They have no idea of caring for themselves. To these poor invalids the medical lady missionary comes as an angel of mercy. Her hand tenderly touches the aching head or supports the sinking frame. Her voice in loving accents whispers in the bewildered ear the story of love and grace and mercy even for a hated, despised, lonely woman. When such help does not come, the soul passes into the very blackness of darkness without one ray of hope or expectation for the future.

When widowhood overtakes these women they feel that now indeed they are forsaken, cursed by the gods and left forlorn. The wife of the barber is the chosen agent in the initial act of cruelty to a widow. When the sick man or boy

is about to die, there are in waiting from four to six of these women. As he expires, they rush upon the widow and tear from her ears and nose their jewels. The bangles and bracelets which cover the arms are violently broken off, and she is thrust into a dark room there to remain till the body of the dead is ready to be burned. None of the women of the family dare to come near lest they too partake of the curse and become widows; but from them all are heard words of hatred and cursing instead of sympathy. She must not speak or weep, but must bear in silence all the bitter reviling of the relatives of the dead. In a few hours all is ready; the dead body is borne out by hired bearers on a rude bier covered with cloth. Closely following come the professional mourning women, who wail and beat their breasts as they go. Behind them walk the male relatives, followed by the women of the family, all closely veiled, while two hundred feet in the rear comes the poor little widow, sometimes such a child that she does not know why she is so treated; for should a boy or man die immediately after the betrothal ceremonies she is held responsible and is a life-long widow. The barbers' wives keep up a continuous cry of "Beware of this accursed widow! Keep away,

lest evil befall you!" And so, regarded by all with scorn, she goes wearily on till they reach the place of burning, which is always near the water, either a river or tank. She is pushed into the water, there to remain till the relatives have bathed and worshiped, and washed and dried their clothes. The dead body is placed on the wood which has been in readiness several days, and is often composed of the costliest kinds, such as ebony and sandal woods. The son or brother, who has previously had his face and head shaven, lights the wood and watches the burning body. When half consumed, the bones are broken to facilitate the burning. The ashes are gathered and carefully moulded into a little image which must be kept with the utmost care. The widow is now taken out of the water. If dead, they praise her, and say of her that she has gone to wait upon her husband. If living, she is dragged home in her dripping garments and again pushed into the dark room, where she must stay for fourteen days and nights in utter silence and alone. The children of the family bring food and fling it to her, but the women are afraid and only speak to her in cursing. Widows have actually starved to death in the midst of abundance, because their relatives were afraid to go near them.

On the fourteenth day, the male relatives take the image of ashes to the river-side. There it is set up, worship is made, and offerings of food and money are placed before it. Only after this ceremony is the soul supposed to find a new home. Should any accident prevent the performance of these services, the soul would travel on through all eternity a relentless demon persecuting every one with whom it came in contact. The home which it finds may be in the body of a man, an animal, a reptile, a bird, a fish, or an insect. Every care is taken by Hindus not to destroy life, and so prevent the soul from working its way up and out, finally to be absorbed into the great Brahm, who sits in the highest heavens wrapped in contemplation of his own greatness. When the ceremonies are quite finished, the mourners return to the house, the widow is brought out and clothed in the mourning robe, which is usually of dark blue cotton. Her hair is all shaved off and is never allowed to grow again. She has to pay the death-dues to the Brahmins—often a large amount. She cannot inherit anything from her husband, but must live on alms. Her male relatives pass before her, each one casting at her feet a little money, and with every gift a curse. If

they give her a large sum, and she have no son, she may adopt one and become servant to him and his wife. She cannot live alone without loss of character. If she has but little given her, she must spin for her living, toiling hard and making only six to nine cents a week. If she choose, she may go out as a pilgrim, visiting shrines all over the country, praying that her dead husband may soon become a Brahmin. If she stays with her mother-in-law, she has to be a servant; if she goes to her mother she must be a servant there. Dark and loveless as her life was before, it is absolutely hopeless now; for she may never more be one of the family, but must be a menial; standing always unless bidden to sit, never speaking unless first spoken to, never taking part in any wedding festivity, or joining the other women in holy-day ceremonies. She can eat but once in twenty-four hours, and then only the coarsest of food. There is but very little difference between the wives of rich and poor men. In the one case the work is done by servants, the wife has a better quality of food and more of it. Her clothing is better and her jewels are gold instead of lead and wood. Of ordinary comfort there is none to be found in the women's part of the house. The husband



may, often does, have an elegantly furnished room in which are mirrors, chandeliers, carpets, curtains and easy-chairs; but into that room his mother, wife and daughter never set foot.

These women sometimes laugh and seem merry, but their sad eyes never brighten, and there is no real rest or comfort for them. One has only to see their tired faces, hear the whispered story of cruelty and infidelity, to forever dismiss the idea that the women of India are contented with their lot.

It is with a feeling of relief that I turn to those women to whom the Gospel has come. Think of the joy of learning that Jesus died for them, and that they may have hope. We have a bright example of the power of the Gospel to lift up, and ennoble, in our Girls' Orphanage. Most of the girls came to us in famine years. Their parents were dead; they were wandering about the streets and were brought in to the magistrates and made over to us. In the Orphanage they are given a good education, qualifying them to be teachers and Bible-women. Some of them become the wives of native pastors. They are taught needle-work and various kinds of handiwork. Others enter the medical school, pass through years of rigid training, and

graduate fully capable of ministering to the wants of their heathen sisters. These girls are all Christians, and are bright and happy, loving and contented. The older girls have charge of the little ones, being responsible for their order and cleanliness. Each girl also has to take her turn in the kitchen, and so they all know how to cook and care for their homes and families in after-years.

Perhaps a brief account of an entirely different class of people may be interesting. Any one visiting India is impressed by the appearance of numbers of men with matted hair and wild face, smeared with ashes and nearly naked. They are the devotees or religious beggars. Many of these men take upon themselves vows of silence, and do not utter a word for years; others vow to sit or stand in one place for years. In order that they may perform the latter vow, a rope is stretched between two trees, and on this they lean. Their friends and relatives bring them food and water, and reverence them as holy men. Others expose themselves to the heat, sitting with uncovered heads under the burning sun. Still others, who fear that they may be born again as serpents, go through a singular penance. They leave their homes, and at the

threshold prostrate themselves on the ground. With hands extended above their heads, they make a mark on the soil, get up and walk to the mark, and again prostrate themselves; and so on through weary days until they reach the shrine, sometimes five hundred miles away from where they started. Of course rivers must be crossed; and in order to overcome this difficulty they ascertain the width of the river. If it is found to be a mile wide, they go back a mile, and cover the ground again with their bodies. They are generally accompanied by friends who carry jars of water from the river Ganges. In the month of November these men may be seen crawling through the streets of Lucknow in every direction. The approaches to the temple dedicated to this worship are running with water which has been brought from a distance and poured over the idol. Many of these worshipers die from exhaustion.

We once met a man toiling painfully up the mountain steeps to worship at a great temple in the snowy range. His body was covered with heavy chains, which he wore as a type of sin. These men are most earnestly seeking salvation.

"Shall we whose souls are lighted  
 With wisdom from on high—  
 Shall we to men benighted  
 The lamp of *life* deny?"

## *Two Hundred and Fifty Millions of Women Depend for the Gospel upon the Women of the Protestant Churches of America.*

Nine-tenths of the contributions to Foreign Missions are given by *one-tenth* of the church membership, while only one-half of the membership give anything. The average amount per member is fifty cents per annum—only the seventh part of a cent per day for the conversion of a thousand millions of heathen! An average of five cents a week from every member of the Protestant churches of the United States would bring into the treasury during a single year, \$16,500,000. *Ninety-eight* per cent. of the Church's contributions for religious purposes is spent at home, while only *two* per cent. is applied to the Foreign Mission field. There are 75,000 ministers in the United States, or one to about every 600 persons, while only one is allotted to half a million in heathen lands. *There are 1,500 counties in China without a single missionary.*

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